Computer Gameplay as Grunt and Reflection

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My principle computer game experience has been with first person shooters (FPS) such as *Quake I* (1996), *Quake II* (1997), *Half-life* (1998), *Max Payne* (2001), and *Halo* (2001)[1]. Consequently, I became fascinated with the subtle differences that emerged against this background while playing *SSX*, the series of simulation snowboarding computer games available both for the Xbox and Play Station 2 consoles[2]. Within the milieu of FPS games, a central narrative unfolds only as the player takes sufficient actions, which include navigating through mazes, solving perceptual/conceptual puzzles, and defeating an ascending spectrum of foes through acquiring more powerful weaponry as well as through acquiring mastery of gameplay maneuvers. The narrative relies on players moving through cardinal points of encounters with foes, with actions between such encounters serving a catalytic purpose of moving the player along to the next encounter[3]. While sharing a resemblance with FPS games, *SSX*'s gameplay exploits the possibilities of engaging the player with each perceptual moment, rather than relying on a conceptual narrative to motivate the player, a quality upon which FPS games rely heavily. With the boundary between cardinal and catalytic points blurred, computer games like *SSX*[4] proceed more as a relentless succession of acts and results that emerges according to the limitations and challenges of the virtual world of the game.

However, as with anything novel, the player must overcome a learning curve in the encounter with the design principles of the gameplay, the significance of which I will work to elaborate in this essay, grounding the discussion first with some of my initial experiences playing *SSX*. For instance, after struggling valiantly but failing to maneuver successfully in the computer game, I let go of the controller in frustration. Something interesting but quite obvious happened: I discovered that the constant *baseline*-state of the gameplay is motion "downhill." Surprisingly, whenever my avatar got stuck, or if it slammed into an object, it reincarnated back on course. Eventually, all on its own, it reached the end, though of

course in last place, with no score, and it was decidedly not very fun—I was not "playing" the game. This quality, which I call one of the "Ideas" of the gameplay, innovates from most FPS games where one can "vegetate," stay put or wander in the same area after eliminating resident dangers, without moving on. The player effectively remains in a catalytic stasis between cardinal points, and unless the player can enact the next cardinal moment, which often requires unlocking a puzzle of some sort[5], boredom inevitably results. The experience of the *necessity* of the movement in *time* is missing in most FPS games at these moments, which requires some conceptual motivation for the player to take the necessary actions to move on. On the other hand, this necessity of movement in time is the primary Idea, or design principle, of *SSX*'s gameplay. I capitalize "Idea" in deference to Arthur Schopenhauer, the 19th century German philosopher, who understood Platonic Ideas as appearing "in innumerable individuals." He saw these ideas existing "as the unattained patterns of individuals, or as the eternal forms of things. Not themselves entering into time and space, the medium of individuals, [Ideas] remain fixed, subject to no change, always being, never having become" (*World* I 129). An initial conceptual approach to this is possible through imagining the design principles of computer gameplay as timeless and space-less principles that govern repetitious causal expression of individual events in simulated space, but in real time, i.e., time as the player lives through any experience. Computer code merely provides the sufficient reasons for a multiplicity of individual expressions of the Ideas in space and time. I will return to this in more detail below, as it is a central premise in my argument, which seeks to examine the possible spectrum of particular *causal* effects in the game as directly resulting from the player's transformation through mastery of the gameplay. The transformation occurs as the player apprehends the Ideas of gameplay, thus making possible repeating aesthetic experiences for the player.

Mirror Work

With the combination of space and time (co-existence and succession), something *causal* necessarily happens beyond the baseline inertia of gameplay, but only in conjunction with acts of the player via the game controller. This is essential for a player to be engaged at a root, intuitive level of direct perception, especially when each action impacts the *degree* in which causality manifests within the limitations present in the gameplay's Ideas. Playing *SSX* once again[6], I participated causally within the structure of gameplay, above the baseline, through *helping* my avatar steer left or right, taking advantage of gravity, the hardness of the snowboard against that of the slope's curves, and the different degrees of friction present between ice, snow, and rock. I realized that the possible range of maneuvers of the avatar's body, especially in relation to the physical environment, was my responsibility to manage at every moment. Apprehending this Idea allowed new possibilities

for my acting in the game: I discovered that I could make my avatar go faster with coordinated maneuvers. Then I found I could "crouch" down in preparation for a jump, though while crouching, steering became limited. Additionally, expressing the Idea that allows the avatar to overcome the limitations of gravity, jumping must be done at just the right moment when ascending a ramp to take full advantage of airtime. During each short airtime I learned to enact a range of individual tricks, another Idea of the gameplay, from the simple to the elaborate; performing more of the latter extends airtime. The height of the jump, coupled with complex tricks that land well, adds to one's points and simultaneously one's "boost bar." Through a series of successful tricks, the boost bar fills up, lending the avatar extra speed, but more importantly, allowing the performance of an "über trick," a special trick unique to one's chosen avatar enacted through a particular button combination. However, the boost bar diminishes if the player either lands poorly, or does not perform an über trick within the 20 second time limit. But on a roll, a player can perform über trick upon über trick, going farther with each jump and faster while scooting across ice and snow, which, after five successful über tricks, results in an "infinite" boost bar. Another Idea of the gameplay shares a resemblance to FPS games: the closest the avatar can get to killing anything is knocking down opponents in a race. The game rewards this immediately with a full boost bar, but punishment may come at some later point in that course or one following, where the slighted character, now an "enemy," enacts revenge in kind. In comparison to FPS games, the causal combination of the Ideas of gameplay in *SSX* relies very little on the player "getting" the conceptual narrative; rather, aside from the boost bar, the gameplay is completely perceptual. During gameplay, a strange sensation grew that I was learning to act causally within the virtual world, relying on my intuitive understanding of the law of causality in an immediate manner, as if I were in a dance with an image of myself in a kind of mirror.

And so, unlike FPS games, getting through to the end is not the aim of *SSX*'s gameplay, nor is it looking at the scenery, however stunning it may be—especially in *SSX III*. Either in a race against others or in a show-off event, each particular course compels the player to perform above the baseline inertia in an ascending scale of performance. Repeating individual courses allows the player to gradually assimilate and overcome the gameplay's more difficult limitations in increasingly elaborate displays as the avatar "develops" with the player. While I can safely attest to Schopenhauer's innocence of computer gameplay, his theory of Ideas offers a helpful context to think about gameplay. He asserts that any given organism (in this case, the player via the avatar) expresses its "Idea through a succession of developments one after another, conditioned by a multiplicity of coexisting parts." The unity that emerges after the fact "finds its expression in the necessary relation and concatenation of those parts and developments with one another, according to the law of causality" (*World I* 157). Thus, to fully

develop an avatar beyond its initial given state requires trained skill of the player to move through the concatenation and relations constructed within the memory of the computer game. Furthermore, this only occurs through active, extended engagement of the player in what I call the "mirror work" of gameplay, a quality of all computer games, though some more than others appear to explore its peculiar possibilities to allow for experiences that approaches the aesthetic. Within gameplay, mirror work is the quite real experience, moment by moment and via the game controller, of the player witnessing her stream of actions in relation to certain limitations (for instance, simulated gravity, solidity, elasticity, friction, but also the capacities of the avatar—each represents an Idea) translated immediately into the causal nexus of the gameplay. Consequently, results that appear in the causal nexus then provide further motives for actions within the game in a cascading dance of participation: a play of opposition of the engaged player within the game environment.

Through my own extended engagement with this series of games, I watched myself, noting moment by moment each act I performed. Even though I came to know conceptually where and when I would encounter the next turn, ramp, or rail, how I acted in the actual moment—once the actual perceptual motive appeared in space and time on the screen—I could only know just *after* I had pressed the buttons on the controller. Through multiple repetitions I acquired access to more elaborate expressions in the game: finding the best approach to a particularly tricky ramp, or discovering a secret part of the course after a dozen times passing it without notice, or unlocking specific trick-performance capacities through effecting various button combinations on the controller *before* jumping and also while in mid-air. The consistent result the gameplay calls forth from the player is *grace*, which for Schopenhauer, "consists in every movement being performed and every position taken up in the easiest, most appropriate, and most convenient way, and consequently in being the purely adequate expression of its intention or of the *act of will*, without any superfluity that shows itself as wooden stiffness" (*World I* 224 my emphasis). Thus, I noted to myself that what moved my hands and what became translated onto the screen was my Will[7], in essence, a series of successive, subjective, and silent *grunts* in response to perceptual motives that resulted in either inadequate or adequate, graceless or graceful, expressions.

The Will

What is the Will, *really*? According to Schopenhauer, the Will is the most immediate "object" human beings are conscious of within themselves. It is more *there* than anything else that appears as an object of knowledge, whether percept or concept. Firstly, all the *other* objects in the world, including our own bodies, we know only mediately, i.e., after the fact, as perceptions the intellect/brain composes from sensations occurring through the body. However,

we know our own bodies in another manner besides as an object of perception extended in space; we know it also from within, in self-consciousness, as Will, which we come to know in the actions we take (grunts), thus, in time alone. The rest of the world we know only in a single manner: only as objects concerning which we supply every manner of explanation to justify their existence in relation to us. This dual knowledge of our selves is very much *like* a mirror reflection, in which our image is an immediate translation of our body, but in an alien medium. But what I'm writing of here is more primordial that a mirror reflection: Schopenhauer asserts one "cannot actually will the act without at the same time being aware that it appears as a movement of the body" (*World I* 100). Against a commonplace assumption, he expresses that between movements of the body known in objective perception and acts of the Will in self-consciousness no causal bond exists: "the movement of our limbs by virtue of mere acts of will is indeed a miracle of such common occurrence that we no longer notice it; but if we once turn our attention to it, we become vividly conscious of the incomprehensible nature of the matter, just because we have here before us something we do *not* understand as effect of its cause" (*World II* 36). Furthermore, we only know our own acts of Will just as we perform them, and are often surprised how much our actions deviate from our conceptual intentions. This is a peculiar mode of amazement we may have about life, about mirrors, and so also about computer games.

With the ever-present ubiquity of the Will in self-consciousness, most forget the Will is there grunting what it wants into existence in a spectrum of articulateness, beginning with baseline simplicity, but with the addition of increasing degrees of intention and mastery, ingeniously elaborate articulations become possible. Works of art, including computer games like *SSX*, are objects that can awaken us to wonder over the often forgotten yet ever-present Will that marches relentlessly through time, while we either unconsciously follow in its wake, or intentionally vary its expression, successfully or not, against the limitations of the given environment. Computer gameplay, then, can permit players to bring to various degrees of expression, and thus into perception, a spectrum of acts of Will, or grunts, from the non-participatory baseline to stunning virtuosity, producing states of aesthetic wonder and so temporary release from the concerns of everyday life. Adequately reflected grunts are actually quite beautiful, and gameplay allows anyone that expression, if they but master its possibilities to act gracefully. The cost of admission, however, involves giving up the initial motives for playing, which relinquishing occurs in the apprehension of the Ideas in the adequately reflected grunts.

Ideas

Consequently, as noted above, a central premise to my argument includes seeing computer gameplay as an art form that embodies Platonic Ideas as Schopenhauer elaborates them. Schopenhauer

envisions Ideas as acts of Will objectified for a subject of knowing—who "knows all things and is known by none" (*World I* 5)—though we no longer "see" the Ideas while the everyday mode of being in the world predominates consciousness. For example, the baseline motion of the game embodies in individual expressions the Ideas waiting to happen that are the same Ideas that allow for experiences of gravity, solidity, and friction. Against this, working to assimilate and overcome the baseline, are the Ideas included in the possible range of maneuvers of the avatar's body; these maneuvers include turning, jumping, performing tricks, and knocking-down opponents, and their adequate expression require grace as defined above. Actually, there is nothing at all mysterious or mystical about Ideas: from the point of view of everyday consciousness, they are quite boring; perception of them offers nothing of interest to the Will. The average player is locked within a relational viewpoint that only sees and enacts individual and mostly inadequate—graceless—iterations of these Ideas; from Schopenhauer's perspective, this is due to the subject of willing having arrogated the subject of knowing. Here, the subject of knowing employs knowledge to constantly provide happiness for the subject who wills, all the while avoiding pain. Thus the subject only sees objects in the world in relation to the Will and does not perceive the Ideas of which individual objects are but iterations. This is the player's initial state, where the Will subordinates the intellect to master the limitations of the gameplay to fulfill the universal motive of games: a state I am presently not in is more important than the state I am in now. Thus, taking certain actions will produce the necessary transformation.

Because computer games' input devices allow for the immediate translation of the player's grunts into an alien and virtual representation, bringing the player to avoid pain and experience satisfaction, computer gameplay acts as a mirror for the player. Within this mirror, Ideas, as objectified acts of Will outside time and space, appear within a causal nexus of perception as individual expressions. The repetitious activity of mirror work—with its inexplicable disconnect between the player's actions represented and translated simultaneously as acts of the body *and* as acts in an alien, defamiliarizing medium—makes possible the player's entrance into an aesthetic experience wherein the subject of knowing, having temporarily left behind concern for herself as an individual body (both on the screen and off), perceives the Ideas present in the causal and graceful contest of the gameplay. But of course, the condition that must be met for this to occur is the player's assimilation of and conquest over the limitations of the game in a state of motiveless mastery.

Two Poles of Explanation: Empiricism and Rationalism

To envision the mirror work of gameplay as providing access to perceiving Ideas and so to aesthetic experiences, we must navigate between and beyond two poles that explain computer gameplay as narrative and as semiotic simulation, because such explanations

refer to individual expressions rather than the Ideas gameplay brings players to perceive. These poles appear in two chapters from the book *The Video Game Theory Reader* (2003), edited by Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron. One pole is represented by Torbin Grodal, author of "Stories for Eye, Ear, and Muscles: Video Games, Media, and Embodied Experiences." Gonzalo Frasca, in his article "Simulation versus Narrative," represents the other. Both scholars believe that current methods of explaining gameplay fail to account for important phenomena that their explanations address. Grodal, for instance, argues that explanations relating computer gameplay back to other narrative media such as theater or film, remain in the mediate realm. As a result, these explanations cannot access "unmediated real-life experiences and those mental structures that support such experiences." This, he says, is because computer games "are simulations of basic modes of real-life experiences" (129). Frasca, on the other hand, while also wishing to move beyond the limitations of previous explanations, focuses on moving *away* from narrative explanations entirely, in fact, deploring them. Frasca distinguishes this limiting narratological view as inherently representational, and so failing to account for computer games as simulation, an alternative semiological structure (222). While each attacks the other's limitations, in both cases, what gameplay *is* (as opposed to how it works), and what it means to the player, remains ill-defined, mainly because both explanations are completely mediate, that is, they rely on grounds for knowledge not immediately known, but instead through the everyday mode of knowing—explaining a phenomenon in relation to something else. Thus they do not address that which remains forever unexplained in any objective scientific or linguistic elaboration, namely, the Will that objectifies itself in the forms gameplay provides, and is immediately accessible to the player through her engaged experience in the gameplay.

But how can we address and include the Will, the most immediate object of knowledge, even though it does not permit explication through the means Grodal and Frasca provide? Schopenhauer provided such an avenue well in advance of these more recent iterations of an old philosophical controversy between empiricism and rationalism. In fact, he diligently outlines the inherent limitations in *any* explanation, which permitted him to distinguish the aesthetic mode of experience from everyday knowledge of the world within which these explanations arise. Within the aesthetic mode, the subject perceives the Idea without subordinating it to explanations of why and how, explanations that draw *relations* between phenomena in a morphological or etiological context—morphology describes and classifies shapes and forms, while etiology explains how and why changes occur between successive states. Schopenhauer calls this "the principle of sufficient reason[8]."

The Principle of Sufficient Reason

It is crucial to this entire conversation to define clearly what this principle is, as it governs everyday consciousness in all its possible

forms. Though a good start lies in the commonplace "there is an explanation for everything," it is a bit more extensive than that. It is the principle according to which *all* possible experience occurs for a subject of knowing. Thus, the principle gives the subject specific grounds allowing for knowledge of corresponding objects of experience. There are four grounds, also called faculties of knowing. The first is the *a priori* forms of sensibility of time and space—permitting knowledge of temporal and spatial relations, prior to experience but valid for all experience; time and space combine in the understanding—permitting intuitive perceptions to occur within a causal nexus; third is self-consciousness—permitting immediate knowledge of our acts of Will as they proceed from perceptual and conceptual motives; and lastly abstract reason—permitting knowledge and manipulation of discursive concepts abstracted from the classes of objects occurring within the purview of the first three faculties of knowledge. The principle supplies the subject with knowledge of how any given object "stands in a necessary relation to other objects, on the one hand as determined, on the other as determining" (*World I* 6). From parking a car between two other cars to judging the merits and flaws of a political speech, the principle of sufficient reason generates the subject's necessary relations to objects in order to enact the aims of the Will.

Thus, due to the principle's inherent focus on relations between the various objects of knowledge possible for a subject, any given morphological and etiological explanation that the principle supplies will leave the actual phenomenon unexplained. For instance, the commonplace view that sees computer games as "interactive films" leaves the phenomenon of computer gameplay as opaque as ever: it seeks to answer the question: "what is gameplay like?" Not "what *is* gameplay?" Even my initial demonstrations of *how SSX* differs from FPS games falls within the same limitation, in addition to others: from scientific explanations about how computer games simulate mental structures resembling real life (Grodal), to formal, linguistic explanations that see computer games as behaving not as traditional texts, sequences of signs, but "like machines or sign generators" (Frasca 223). These express relational viewpoints that describe one thing in terms of another, leaving aside the inner nature of computer gameplay; what it is as Idea, outside these explanations, remains untouched in its conversion into causal and conceptual terms.

As a result, explanations always and already remain within the field of what Schopenhauer calls representation, teaching us "nothing more than why in each case every definite phenomenon must appear just at this time here and just at this place now" (*World I* 121). A significant problem confronts us here concerning the inner nature of things, the unknowable thing-in-itself that *only* appears to us according to the nature of our intellect. As Immanuel Kant says in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, because space and time are sensible intuitions within us (what Schopenhauer calls the first faculty of knowledge given above) that allow for the appearance of objects in causal relations to each other (the understanding, the second fac-

ulty), the thing in itself "remains entirely unknown to us." In fact, Kant continues, we "are acquainted with nothing except our way of perceiving" (168). From without, then, only appearances related to other appearances are available to us. However, Schopenhauer claims that there is a way, "that we are not merely the *knowing subject*, but that *we ourselves* are also among those realities or entities we require to know, that *we ourselves are the thing-in-itself*" (*World II* 195). Access to the inner nature of things lies within us as *Will*, known to the subject by virtue of the mirror of self-consciousness. And it is consciousness of this object, the Will, that grants us a view of gameplay outside the relational, everyday viewpoint governed by the various forms of the principle of sufficient reason. What we play in computer gameplay *is* this very principle, which itself reflects the Will.

Narcissus Who?

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Teresias, the blind prophet, foretold that Narcissus would grow to a ripe old age only "if he does not come to know himself." As the story goes, this statement remained quite innocuous until the boy's beautiful image inspired such unfulfilled longing that one of his many spurned lovers begged the gods to punish the ingrate. The sufferer asked for the beautiful one to fall in love with another in the same way they have: "May he too be unable to gain his loved one." The gods took pity and granted the broken-hearted request. And so, once Narcissus caught sight of his own image in a pool of water, he gave up food and drink until he completely wasted away for the sake of that insubstantial reflection (83-85). One of many fruitful uses of this myth is of course its uncanny similarity to the experience of computer gameplay. Here, the Will of the player—at least the devoted one—remains engaged despite pressing needs to attend to everyday duties and necessities: from cleaning the house, paying the bills, or having intimate, fulfilling conversations necessary for the growth of any relationship; to forsaking natural urges to eat, drink, and eliminate, or failing to acknowledge honestly the various physical pains that visit the persistently engaged player. This aspect of computer gameplay has resulted in much consternation for those concerned with protecting and preserving the uninterrupted sequence of quotidian events that comprise everyday human life. The attitude sings the old complaint issued across the centuries toward the productions of popular culture, that we should dismiss computer games as the height of frivolity because they dissipate energies needed either to carry out the duties of life, or to engage in wholesome activities that bear *some* fruit. Computer games, from this perspective, are but shadows, insubstantial reflections worthy of the same condemnation that Plato himself reserved for poetry and rhetoric. After all, playing *SSX* does not actually allow you to *learn* how to snowboard, and nor does it exercise the body, so the commonplace goes. But those apparently locked within the reflection of gameplay could perhaps argue that a little harm to the fabric of the State might do

us all a little good. In fact, maybe computer gameplay awakens us to the fact that we *are* locked within another kind of engagement, except that we're completely unconscious of this: our "naturalized" state. Computer games educate us toward seeing that we inhabit a cave not too unlike the one that Plato famously describes in Book VII of *The Republic*.

And so I turn to another metaphorical reading of the reflection from which Narcissus cannot turn himself away. The mirror and its capacity to reflect is also a metaphor for the faculty of abstract reason, or *reflection*, that is, in Schopenhauer's words, "the copy or repetition of the originally presented world of perception, though a copy of quite a special kind in a completely heterogeneous material" (*World I* 40). And this is but one of four faculties of the principle of sufficient reason, which itself reflects the inner nature of the world in an alien medium. But it is the capacity to reason, above all others, that distinguishes human beings as those animals able to form discursive abstract concepts from intuitive perceptions. Once the faculty of judgment forms concepts, our ability to reason combines and compares them, freeing human beings to survey beyond the present moment, to communicate, to carry out planned actions, and to generate, acquire and transmit knowledge. But discursive reason also allows for deception. "Truths," writes Nietzsche, following in the footsteps of Schopenhauer, "are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions" ("On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" 84). The faculty of reason has allowed human beings to dominate everything in the world, including each other. Conceptual knowledge merely serves the aims of the Will to dominate, and as soon as a conceptual paradigm appears to work, the Will loses concern for the perceptions from which concepts came, as well as any and all alien concepts that may compete with the now naturalized view. As a result, people tend to lose touch with the "fact" that concepts in no way equal the richness of perception[9]. What could awaken us back to the world from which our reflections have come? Can Narcissus relinquish his longing for his image, if but to save his life?

It is important to avoid the confusion that could emerge as a result of the way I've characterized this fable. Depending on your point of view, you may see as Narcissistic either those enraptured in the perceptible Ideas present in computer gameplay, or rather those enraptured in the conceptual relations of everyday life. In certain ways, both of them are, though the former offers something the latter does not: aesthetic contemplation and its consequent freedom—if but momentary—from the purely relational and conceptual thinking of the everyday way of being human. While it mirrors everyday life according to the principle of sufficient reason, gameplay has the potential, through mirror work, to awaken a player so caught in everyday relations to the very nature of being human. And herein lies gameplay's unplumbed possibility, one few games explore, though in my view *SSX* and games like it have approached this expression.

But it really takes something for the player to "see" gameplay this way. It begins with the player subordinating herself to the structure

of gameplay, which allows successive grunts to become articulated in more and more elaborate expressions. Then the player must give something up to see the Ideas of gameplay adequated gracefully; she must forget her own Will. Fortunately, well-designed computer gameplay easily guides players to relinquish the Will's hold on them, by virtue of relinquishing the initial motivation to achieve mastery in a succession of graceful acts, once a level of mastery through mirror work has emerged in the player.

The Aesthetic Experience Versus the Naturalized Perspective

Architecture, the plastic arts of sculpture and painting, the narrative arts of poetry, prose, drama, and film, as well as the musical arts, all have long provided people access to the possibility of awakening from their naturalized states of consciousness. They have provided the means to shock audiences out of deadening habit. I found a handy and familiar definition of naturalization in Fredric Jameson's *Prison House of Language*, as well as what might disturb a consciousness so constituted. Habituation to a particular conceptual state, Jameson writes, "strengthens us in the feeling that the things and events among which we live are somehow 'natural,'" or permanent (58); of course, as noted above, Schopenhauer defines this state as one in which knowledge only serves the constantly present aims of the Will. These aims include the ever popular and repetitive past-times of feeding one's belly, engaging in various forms of sexual gratification, and fulfilling urges toward conquest or preservation of past conquests. Jameson does not directly address the Will or its aims, leaving it subsumed under the concept of naturalization.

However, in order to reinforce art's privileged role in snapping us out of our semi-permanent, mesmerized stupor, Jameson introduces Shklovsky's term *ostranenie*, defamiliarization, as the proper function of art. This quality offers us the prospect "to be reborn to the world in its existential freshness and horror" (51), and which promises us "the renewal of perception" (52). The subject of knowledge, normally under the charge of the Will, escapes temporarily from the conceptual structure the aims of the Will subjected it to. I would contend that such experiences are few and far between, at least in relation to traditional forms of art.

The rarity of such experiences has a handy explanation as well. Walter Benjamin laments that in the age of mechanical reproduction, the *aura* of the original work of art is lost in its convenient conversion to accessibility in the multitudes of simulations produced for economic profit ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"). How then, can depotentialized works of art reawaken us to the "existential freshness and horror" of life? And would we want such an awakening? After all, what would happen to our beloved reflection if we turned away from it?

And this brings us to consider the thought that maybe the place to look for an answer is not entirely in the work of art, but in the spectator who perceives the Idea of the artwork outside the dictates

of the Will and the principle of sufficient reason the Will employs. Perception of Ideas is *not* recasting newfangled morphological and etiological explanations according to the forms of the principle of sufficient reason. Rather, the player's subjectivity undergoes a transformation once the known object, namely gameplay, passes out of all relation to all other objects and appears solely as a *what*, a mirror reflection that displays graceful acts originating in grunts, without a *why* or a *how* in intellectual sight; it is a "renewal of perception." The player who formerly knew objects within the context of everyday consciousness dominated by the aims of the Will, loses herself in the play of a computer game by virtue of "stepping" out of the everyday way of knowing objects. As Hans-Georg Gadamer distinguishes it in *Truth and Method*, play "fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play" (102). Gameplay is a sort of ruse that invites and leads players, through engaging their Will within the structure of the gameplay, into a state of risk in which the Will relinquishes its hold on the player's consciousness, absorbed as it is in the mirror work of gameplay.

I must qualify more clearly this everyday way of knowing, which, contrary to the ideal of disinterestedness, quite often subordinates gameplay to its mode of knowing, apparently despite my claim to the contrary. Schopenhauer writes that when someone is subject to ordinary everyday consciousness that person "is not capable, at any rate continuously, of a consideration of things wholly disinterested in every sense…. He can direct his attention to things only in so far as they have some relation to his [W]ill," and thus the person "does not linger long over the mere perception, does not fix his eye on an object for long, but, in everything that presents itself to him, quickly looks merely for the concept under which it is to be brought, just as the lazy man looks for a chair, which then no longer interests him" (*World I* 187). It seems then that it is just as likely, even more so, that gameplay merely extends the interest of the player's Will to another sphere, and that the aesthetic experience, along with its aura, is just as mute as it is in traditional works of art.

However, almost in spite of this, the player perceives the Idea of gameplay by *virtue* of its endless reproductions of individual expressions as the player overcomes, in play, the limitations of the gameplay. Concern for the relations between individual expressions disappears within those moments of aesthetic pleasure. Through a series of successive grunts, the player's Will meets and exceeds the motives present in the structure of gameplay, and thus brings about the adequate objectifications of the Will, the Ideas of the computer game. For instance, in *SSX Tricky*, in single-person play, one develops a character through successfully placing in 3rd place or higher three times in a row in each venue. Each conquest of a venue allows for skill development to accrue, such as speed, stability, edging, and tricks. A new, more challenging venue becomes available once the player wins the one prior. Aided with abstract knowledge of the performance of tricks through an extensive trick tutorial, the player develops mastery through successive

repetitions, perfecting responses to the environment through mirror work, eventually leading to brilliant spectacles of dance and play in the relentless movement through time of an actual course. In such a manner, the player fulfills the Idea of the character within the structure of gameplay.

Whether the player sits back and conceptualizes in articulate terms this "renewal of perception" is immaterial: it is a subjective aesthetic experience where the concerns of the Will present in the player as an individual vanish in the direct *perception* of the Ideas of gameplay. The language of everyday life does not supply ready-made terms to allow such conceptualization. In fact, Schopenhauer states that the "Apprehension of an Idea, its entry into our consciousness, comes about only by means of a change in us, which might also be regarded as an act of self-denial" (*World II* 367). The state of self-denial is one where the subject of knowing unhinges from the subject of willing, and it is in this that aesthetic pleasure arises (*World I* 216). Lack and the endless parade of urges meant to fill such a lack, though never succeeding, constantly fill the consciousness of the subject of knowing with concern and anxiety, and so long as this is the case, "we never obtain lasting happiness or peace" (*World I* 196). Thus, the aesthetic experience is a state where "the attention [of the subject of knowing] is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the [W]ill" (196). And with this self-denial, or forgetfulness, comes the temporary loss of consciousness of individuality and even of one's body. Thus, eating, drinking, cleaning, communicating, all acts that preserve the individual, including those biological, social, and political, fall to the wayside in momentary states of pleasure of a kind that does not whet the appetite of the Will, because the Will cannot "relate" to the mirrored reflection of itself in the defamiliarizing medium of computer gameplay.

Schopenhauer's Dialectic: Gameplay of Oppositions

Schopenhauer sees the Ideas as the Will—otherwise completely unknowable—appearing as object for a subject, prior to and thus outside any and all other relations governed by the principle of sufficient reason (henceforth abbreviated as PSR). The PSR then produces individual expressions of the Ideas for individual knowing subjects[10]. Each individual expression is inadequate because the various Ideas struggle for objectification within the same piece of matter[11]. A simple example would be the contest between gravity and magnetism for the same piece of iron, where given the mass of the piece of iron, one of the forces will "win" over the other. If one were ever to "relax," the other takes possession, as it has been ceaselessly "waiting" for the occasion: causality merely permits opportunities for the expression of Ideas to appear individually (*World I* 26). This is, in essence, Schopenhauer's dialectic, which provides a direct aid in envisioning computer gameplay as the contest between the player and the game structure, which channels the

Will of the player by opposing it with the limitations present in matter (gameplay). The player's Will acts in successive grunts, expressing the adequate Ideas present in the game, which include the interplay of gravity, solidity, elasticity, and friction in various causal expressions with the avatar. The gameplay subordinates the Will of the player to actuate expressions that contend against these baseline limitations, thus allowing for the higher Idea of gameplay to emerge into full, graceful expression in the capacities the avatar expresses through the player's articulated grunts.

Schopenhauer's main idea appearing in various forms throughout his work *The World as Will and Representation* shares an interesting relationship to the fable of Narcissus. The philosopher claims that the Will to live knows itself in its own objectification in the world as representation, though in a completely alien way. The Will is present whole and complete as the thing in itself in each of the multitudes of phenomenal objects appearing and passing away in space, time, and causality, as these forms only apply to the phenomena of the Will, not to the Will itself. A mystery lies in the inexplicable unity of the subject of knowing and the Will it knows as its most immediate object: this is the essence of mirror work. It is an experience, hidden from everyday consciousness, in which the knower who never knows herself, recognizes herself in her own Will that occurs for her as object in self-consciousness. However, this only occurs when a shock, an aesthetic arrest, temporarily pulls the subject of knowing out of its servitude to the ever-present aims of the Will. Rather than always seeing things in relation to other things, the subject sees the PSR itself as an object. Thus the player, lost in play, sees the gameplay as the reflecting pool into which Narcissus gazes.

Conclusion

As the structuring principle that permits and conditions all possible ways objects appear in relation to each other and in relation to the subject of knowledge, the PSR is the formal model of any particular computer game engine: what is imprecisely referred to as the game's "physics." Game engines simulate the activity of the PSR, and knowledge of this is one avenue toward aesthetic defamiliarization. However, this can only occur once the player is so lost in play—in the zone, so to speak—that transformation through self-denial brings the player to effect graceful and adequate reflections of a succession of grunts *and* thus, to apprehend the timeless forms governing the gameplay's expression in time, space, and causality. For instance, when a player reaches a level of mastery in a game such as *SSX*, the dance of mirror work reveals the operations of space and time fused into causality, with the player overcoming the gameplay limitations (gravity, solidity, and friction) through what Schopenhauer calls "*overwhelming assimilation*." The philosopher continues, stating that the Will, objectifying itself in all Ideas, "strives for the highest possible objectification, and in this case gives up the low grades of its phenomenon after a con-

flict, in order to appear in a higher grade that is so much the more powerful." The higher Idea "can appear only by subduing the lower Ideas" (*World I* 145-146). Lost in the contest, struggling for mastery, the Will is so engaged that it merely uses the PSR to achieve its aims. But once a surfeit of mastery accrues, the player produces the spectacle of play that is the adequate objectification of the Idea of gameplay, again and again. To borrow a metaphor from the film *The Matrix*, it is not unlike Neo finding himself capable of stopping bullets, fighting with ease against the Agents, and even *assimilating* them.

Notes

[1]I use the adjective *computer* instead of *video* to include the distinction Rochelle Slovin makes concerning the experience of disconnect inherent in computer games. In her article "Hot Circuits: Reflections on the 1989 Video Game Exhibition of the American Museum of the Moving Image," Slovin brings out this distinction of disconnect as part of the literacy non-digital folks lack: "the ability of the video game player to intuit the link between the physical movement of a joystick and the corresponding movement of the onscreen player" (145). This turns out to be one of the most important transformations in literacy the computer age has brought us, which appeared initially as a graphical user interface. Hence, in order to include this most fundamental distinction as a corollary premise to my claim that computer gameplay is grunt reflected, I use the adjective *computer* to describe all related expressions.

[2]Throughout this paper, when I refer to *SSX*, I include all three incarnations: *I* (2000), *Tricky* (2001), and *III* (2003), unless of course I highlight a particular quality in one distinct from the others.

[3]Roland Barthes, in his essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," defines cardinals as functional units within a narrative that either posit or resolve uncertainty, thereby presenting some form of reversal in the narrative. Catalysers fill narrative space between cardinal points, and "are only consecutive units," while "cardinal units are both consecutive and consequential" (94).

[4]*Downhill Domination* (2003) is another game that capitalizes on this quality. There are others of varying qualities, but in my experience, *SSX* and *Downhill Domination* exploit this more than most.

[5]While playing *Max Payne* (2001), for example, I encountered several instances where I did not immediately recognize the causal relations occurring in the mental picture I had of the game. Therefore, I could not take the necessary action to move forward in the game until I recognized, for instance, that a block of wood lodged behind a truck tire needed to be removed with a gunshot. I "perceived" the block of wood many times, but in fact, it wasn't until I read the game walk-through that I learned what to do with it. This occurrence is quite ubiquitous, not only in computer games,

but also in life. Even in *SSX*, only after running the same course a multitude of times, did I discover a "shortcut," although the entrance to it had been in plain view. The conceptual prejudices that limit perception and thus possibilities for action, while touched on in this paper, requires separate and full treatment.

[6]A note on methodology: aside from an initial conceptual knowledge of the basic maneuvering capabilities via button combinations on the controller, I sought to learn primarily through playing the game, rather than reading about how to best play it.

[7]I capitalize "Will" throughout to distinguish it from the modal verb, although Schopenhauer does not do so—aside from the fact that all German nouns are capitalized. "Will" is not capitalized in Payne's translation.

[8]Another term for this is the principle of individuation: the principium individuationis.

[9]In his *On the Will in Nature*, Schopenhauer defines motive "as an external stimulus from whose influence there first results an *image in the brain*, under whose mediation the will carries out the effect proper, an external bodily action. But now in the human species the place of that image can be taken by a concept that is drawn off from previous images of this kind by putting off their differences. This concept is no longer intuitively perceptible, but is denoted and fixed merely by words" (37).

[10]The law of causality, as but one aspect of the PSR, "determines the limits according to which the phenomena of the forces of nature [Will objectified as Ideas, e.g., gravity, solidity, friction] are distributed in the possession of matter. The original natural forces themselves, however, as immediate objectification of the will, that will as thing-in-itself not being subject to the principle of sufficient reason, lie outside these forms" (*World I* 135).

[11]Thus Benjamin's complaint about the effects of mechanical reproduction on the work of art is actually but a sliver of this larger issue. Space and time together are intellectual conditions for the possibility of experience and these conditions are responsible for the production of the multiplicity of individual expressions derived from Ideas. Works of art merely point more directly at the apprehension of Ideas, which are otherwise quite available for apprehension, if we can "see" for but a moment through the ever-present principle of sufficient reason, and so briefly cease to be locked within individual consciousness.

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BRIDGE
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ASTEROIDS
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DOLPHIN
FOOTBALL
ASTEROIDS
OUTLAW
PAC-MAN
FREEWAY
ASTEROIDS
CENTIPEDE
COLECO
FROGGER
STAMPEDE
PAC-MAN
SURROUND
FROGS AND FLIES
BASEBALL
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